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## ABSTRACT

Media literacy (particularly for television) should be taught in college freshman composition courses. Since young people watch a lot of television, they should understand the dynamics of that medium and be able to use interpretive and evaluative skills in selecting and viewing only the best of the medium. Since the methods of studying literature and media are basically the same, the responsibility to teach media literacy should fall to English teachers. If media literacy is developed early in the freshman composition course, the skills that students develop in dealing with the media can be carried over into considerations of literature.

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Brian J. Delaney  
SCETC Conference  
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"Dealing With the Mass Media in Freshman Composition:  
Do We Have A Choice?"

The title of my presentation this evening is perhaps a bit ambiguous and even a little presumptuous. From an advertising point of view, of course, ambiguity and presumption are virtues which are sought after with dedication and diligence. But the title has now served its advertising function: you are here. As purchasers of the product, you have arrived at the moment of truth: an explanation of what you have bought with your time.

Like any number of other presentations at this or any other academic convention, mine existed for some time as merely a title--full of ambiguity, presumption and precious little else. The title has served as a focus for a number of ideas, feelings, and attitudes I have had for some time on the subjects of freshman composition and the mass media. And I hope now that it will serve as a framework for a discussion of these subjects.

So to the title's question: Do we, as teachers of freshman composition, have the choice of whether or not to deal with the mass media in our courses?

Quite simply, I think we do not.

That said, then, my main purpose is the explanation--and perhaps defense--of this position. To effectively deal with the issues raised in the time allotted, a couple of limitations are necessary. First, while the topic suggests a consideration of mass media in general, the focus of our discussion will be the most omnipresent and influential of the mass media--television. And second, the question of why we must deal with the mass media in freshman composition rather than how to deal with it will receive major attention. The bibliography you

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received will hopefully serve as a basis for your own, individual investigation of how. One final point of clarification at the outset. When I speak of "dealing with" the mass media, the intent is not simply to use the mass media as a subject matter basis for a rhetorical approach to freshman composition. In this discussion, "dealing with" implies a much more fundamental consideration of the subject. While using mass media as a subject matter basis for writing has value, as an approach it does not go far enough toward providing our students with basic media literacy, and media literacy is the key concept I wish to emphasize.

Media literacy involves two levels. On the primary level it is the ability to understand the dynamics of a given medium. For TV these dynamics include a knowledge of the economic imperatives of commercial broadcasting, an awareness of the audience/TV relationship, and at least a nodding acquaintance with the history of the medium. On the second level, media literacy involves the possession of interpretative and evaluative skills. While these skills are kin to the skills we teach for literary study, the nature of the electronic medium alters them in significant ways.

The primary purpose for developing media literacy, then, is to move the viewer--our student--from the position of being a passive receiver of TV messages to the place where he or she is a critical, discerning and selective viewer. Arriving there, our students will be, I feel, much more susceptible to benefit from the other values and skills we work so hard at developing in freshman composition.

A brief review of the traditional approaches and purposes we have long pursued in the teaching of freshman composition will show where our present priorities are and will suggest the basis for including media literacy among those priorities.

As we all know, thanks to textbook publishers and the U. S. postal service, there are literally scores of texts available for an equal number of approaches to the teaching of freshman composition. It is fair to say, however, that with

relatively few exceptions these texts and approaches fall into one of the following three categories:

1. Courses based on some sort of rhetorical model--ancient or modern.
2. Courses based on a genre study approach.
3. Courses based on a combination of rhetorical and genre approaches.

Regardless of which category or approach we individually choose, I think we can agree that underlying all of our efforts in freshman composition are four basic purposes. They are

- to teach writing skills,
- to teach reading skills,
- to teach interpretative skills, and
- to teach humanistic values.

My presumptuous insistence upon our dealing with the mass media in freshman composition classes is based, in part, on the problems created by these traditional, and in many ways excellent, approaches and purposes. Specifically I contend that the mass media--television in particular--is rendering our traditional approaches unworkable and our traditional purposes unreachable. And that is a serious situation.

I am well aware that attacking television is easy--even fashionable--given its omnipresence, it's almost universally acknowledged mediocrity and its unswerving dedication to avoiding reform. But attacking TV is not my purpose. Television is a fact of life, a given, a fixture in our lives--or certainly in our students' lives, if not in our own. And it is neither going to go away, nor release its hold on our students because we think it ought to. Like poor study habits, bad spelling and a generally negative attitude toward English courses, our students bring with them to freshman composition a fairly serious addiction to television and a considerable amount of baggage accumulated on the road to that addiction.

It is this addiction and its implications for us as teachers of English that we must address and deal with.

In order to realistically assess the size and scope of the problem caused by our students' 18 year (and often longer) involvement with television, we need some specific figures. The age of commercial television is relatively short--beginning about 1948 when televisions began to be mass produced at affordable prices. The growth of the industry and its impact on American life and culture during this 30-year period have been tremendous.

In 1948 there were approximately 172,000 television households in the U. S.--a mere 4% of all households. In 1976 (the last year for which complete figures are available) there were 71.2 million television households in the U. S. or 98% of all households. During this same period, incidentally, television advertising billings went from \$8,700,000 to \$6,575,000,000.

The most significant figures, however, from our point of view as teachers of English, are those relating to TV viewing time. Over the years there have been a number and variety of surveys conducted which attempted to ascertain the number of hours per week the mythical "average" American spends watching TV. Recent figures released by the Nielsen Television Index people reveal the following average viewing times: for 2-5 year olds 30 hours/week; for 6-11 year olds 25 hours/week; and for 12-16 year olds 23 hours/week. If these figures are to be believed (and the Nielsen folks command a considerable amount of belief from TV executives) then the "average" 18 year old freshman entering our composition classes has logged approximately 21,545 hours, or almost two and one-half years, of exposure to television. Two and one-half years. An astounding figure. Surely the only other single activity which occupied more of his or her 18 years is sleeping. Projecting ahead to the years after the student leaves our classrooms, the estimate for total viewing time in a normal life span of three score and ten is as high as ten full

years. When we consider that all of us born prior to 1948 entered a world where there was zero viewing time per week, the fact that we now find ourselves entering classrooms where the bulk of our students have already given two and one-half years of their lives to TV viewing is more than astonishing. It is a situation we cannot ignore.

My point in citing these statistics is to underscore the size of the problem we face. In our freshman composition classes we share an audience with television and in terms of exposure, television has gotten, gets, and will continue to get much more of our students' time than we do. But we have always accepted the fact that we must share our students' attention with a variety of diversions. The matter should be one of concern to us because of what this prolonged exposure doesn't do and does do for our students.

What it doesn't do is to make them media smart. Our students, despite an incredible amount of experience with television, are media illiterates. What it does do for them, as we are all too well aware, is to render them disinterested in and inept with the written word. And the written word--writing it, reading it, and interpreting it--is ultimately the basis of all of our efforts in freshman composition.

As rhetoricians we are aware that anyone who wishes to communicate with an audience must take into consideration what that audience brings to the communication situation. Thus, in order to achieve the traditional objectives of the composition course we are going to have to resort to some non-traditional approaches. Or more accurately, we are going to have to allow our traditional approaches to evolve to the extent that we provide our students with both literary literacy and media literacy.

As a practical matter of horse and cart, I feel we should begin the freshman course by attacking the problem of media illiteracy. If the Nielsen viewing

statistics are anywhere near accurate, then the majority of our students can fairly be described as heavy users of TV. Recent research--Marie Winn's, The Plug-In Drug (Viking Press, 1977), to cite just one example -- is beginning to show that heavy TV use has fundamental effects upon the viewer's preception of the world in which he lives. A bizarre example of this phenomena was cited in an article entitled "The Scary World of TV's Heavy User" by George Gerbner and Larry Gross appearing in the April 1976 Psychology Today. It seems that during the first five years of Dr. Marcas Welby's TV practice, he received over 250,000 letters from viewers. Not an extraordinary number for a popular TV show; however, what is extraordinary is that the overwhelming majority of those 250,000 letters contained requests for medical advice.

An extreme example, perhaps, but also a cautionary one as to the power of the medium. Putting that power into the perspective of our classrooms, I think we can all agree that the electronic media has had a tremendous shaping influence on our students' perceptions of the world, of their place in it, and of the values and the role models they consider important.

As English teachers we have always looked to literature for this shaping function--both for ourselves and for our students. But a sample comparison of the two media--the written literary tradition and television--in terms of the nature and quality of the shaping function of each will illustrate the distance between what we want for our students and what they come equipped with.

Literature necessitates involvement and interpretation;  
television fosters passivity.

Literature requires access skills;  
TV requires none.

Literature broadens one's perspective;  
TV broadens through exposure but narrows through repetition.

Literature is complex, involved and often ambiguous;  
TV is generally simplistic and stereotyped.

Literature encourages individuality and the questioning of authority;  
TV encourages conformity and acceptance of the status quo.

Literature offers an eclectic cultural experience;  
TV presents a homogeneous cultural experience.

Literature comments on and interprets reality;  
TV simplifies and thus distorts reality.

Ultimately it is not simply a question of choice--do we or do we not choose to deal with the mass media--but rather a question of necessity, responsibility, and practicality.

It is a necessity because we must meet our audience where they are, not where we wish they would be. We must begin by providing them with the access skills necessary to cope in a world of increasing media complexity and sophistication.

It is a responsibility because both the methods of the literary tradition and those of the media fall within our baliwick. Both use language, both project and comment on values, both use similar forms and both require related decoding and interpretative skills. If we don't deal with the problem of media illiteracy, who will?

And finally it is a practical question. The efforts we expend early in our freshman course to develop media literacy in our students will, I feel certain, be rewarded as the skills developed with the media are carried over into our considerations of literature. The bottom line question is ultimately the practical one. If freshman composition is not the place in the current curriculum to deal with media literacy, where will it get the attention it must have?

If our tradition is alive in the sense that Elizabeth Cowan suggested in her remarks this afternoon, then it is capable of evolving to deal with the challenge presented by the mass media. The bibliography I prepared to accompany this talk is hopefully a step in the direction of bringing about that evolution. It is by no stretch of the imagination definitive; its purpose is to provide us with a point departure on the road to media literacy.

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Presentation: "Dealing With Mass Media in Freshman Composition:  
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Toward Media Literacy: A Beginning Bibliography

Barnouw, Erik. A History of Broadcasting in the United States. 3 Volumes. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966, 1968 and 1970. The standard history of the broadcasting industry. Comprehensive and very readable.

Broadcasting Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: Broadcasting Publications, Inc., 1977. An annual report on all aspects of the broadcasting. Excellent source of facts, figures and statistics.

Dieterich, Daniel, ed. Teaching About Doublespeak. Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1977. A publication of the NCTE Committee on Doublespeak intended for teachers who wish to learn more about the theory and practice of teaching students (K-college) about doublespeak. Order #50276; \$3.95/\$3.75 for NCTE members.

\_\_\_\_\_ and Laurel Ladevich. "ERIC/RCS Report: The Medium and the Message: Effects of Television on Children," Language Arts, 54 (February 1977), 196-204. A review of research into the effects of television on children with suggestions for teacher action.

Grebner, George and Larry Gross. "Living With Television: The Violence Profile," Journal of Communications, 26 (Spring 1976), 172-199. A major scholarly study of the relationship between television viewing and attitudes toward violence. A condensed and simplified version of this article appeared in the April 1976 issue of Psychology Today under the title "The Scary World of TV's Heavy User."

Gold, Herbert. "Television's Little Dramas," Harpers, 254 (March 1977), 88-91. An interesting and detailed consideration of a recent phenomenon--the "made for tv" film.

Karl, Herb. "Mass Con: In Search of Media Meanings," Media and Methods, 13 (May/June 1976), 32-33. A good, brief article on the transformation of news programming into entertainment.

Newcomb, Horace, ed. Television: The Critical View. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976. A collection of essays on television from an adversary point of view.

Powers, Ion. "Eyewitness News," Columbia Journalism Review, 16(May/June 1977),17-24. A well written article on the growing trend toward cuteness in local television news programming and the concomitant loss in coverage of the news.

Public Doublespeak Newsletter. Published by the NCTE Committee on Public Doublespeak. Issued quarterly. Contains essays, a bibliography and teaching suggestions relating to the practice of doublespeak in the mass media. To subscribe send \$2.50 in check or money order (payable to NCTE) to: The Committee on Public Doublespeak, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

Redd, Virginia. "The Ad Man In Search of the Idiot," Public Doublespeak Newsletter, III,3(1977),1-2. A shortened version of a speech given at the NCTE Secondary Section Conference in Boston during April 1976.

Rosenblatt, Roger. "Growing Up on TV," Daedalus (Fall 1976),61-68. A perceptive and insightful article on the effects of television on our concepts of adulthood and family life.

Television Factbook. Washington,D.C.:Television Digest,1977. An annual report on all aspects of the television industry. A wealth of useful factual and statistical information.

Winn,Marie. The Plug-In Drug. New York:The Viking Press,1977. An excellent recent book which focuses on the effects of television on all of its users but particularly on children.